A Multicultural/Multimodal/Multisystems (MULTI-CMS) Approach for Immigrant Families: Structural Equation Modeling of Adolescent Perception of Conflict with Parents

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Research Problem

Immigration to America in this and the previous century is diversifying the social landscape of the United States. Since the enactment of the 1965 Immigration Act, when the United States terminated its exclusionary policy limiting the number of Asians and other people of color into the country, more diverse immigrant groups have entered the United States. As a consequence, the diversity of racial ethnic minorities has expanded, along with their political visibility. These changed social environments have encouraged many researchers to examine various issues related to immigrant families such as acculturation, psychological distress, and family conflict. However, those studies mainly focused on Hispanic families and Chinese or Japanese families from Asian countries. Even though Koreans are one of the fastest growing minority groups, the empirical literature on family conflict within Korean immigrant families is nearly non-existent.

In addition, there are no attempts yet to develop and test a reliable, theoretically consistent model of social work practice for immigrant families. Thus, this study endeavored to investigate the nature and outcomes of Korean immigrant family conflict between parents and adolescents, and suggest and test a structural equation model based on the Multicultural/Multimodal/Multisystems (MULTI-CMS) approach advocated, but not tested by Gopaul-McNicol (1993, 1997).

Conceptual Framework: MULTI-CMS Approach

The MULTI-CMS has a primary assumption that "each cultural set of circumstances results in a unique response and coping style, crucial to one's personality development" (Goupaul-McNicol, 1997, p. ix). Studying the individual from the MULTI-CMS perspective may help social work educators and practitioners to move beyond some idealized historical and homogeneous concept of ethnic culture. This shift is needed

because in modern society most families, including those of minorities, are exposed to a context that is culturally diverse and heterogeneous. It is necessary to approach the research of immigrant families in a way that more truly represents the present reality of these families, a reality that is embedded in a multicultural rather than homogeneous context. In addition, the MULTI-CMS approach emphases an interaction among multiple modalities—behavior, affect, sensations, images, cognitions, interpersonal, and biological. Finally, the MULTI-CMS approach focuses on the following two assumptions: (1) effective intervention requires from the practitioner a flexibility that allows her or him to draw from different systems theories and incorporate them into an overall treatment plan, and (2) effective intervention requires the practitioner to intervene at a variety of systemic levels, such as individual, family, extended family, group, organization and community.

Hypothesized Model

The hypothesized model consists of four components: (1) one exogenous latent variable (acculturation) as an antecedent of outcome; (2) three pseudo-exogenous variables (gender, religion, SES) as demographic variables on each latent variable; (3) two mediating latent variables (family system, social support system); and (4) one outcome latent variable (family conflict). The hypothesized structural equation model for this study suggested that adolescents' acculturation correlates with family systems and family social support systems, which in turn mediate the family conflict. It was also hypothesized that three demographic variables (gender, religion, and SES) affect each latent variable (acculturation, family system, social support system, and family conflict).

Methodology

The model was tested with 304 Korean American adolescents aged 14-18 years. Structural equation modeling was used for the major analysis. The following instruments were used in this study: (1) Suinn-Lew Self-Identity Acculturation Scale (SL-ASLA); (2) Horizontal and Vertical Individualism-Collectivism (HVIC); (3) Social Support Index (SSI); and (4) Asian American Family Conflicts Scale (AAFC).

Results

The final structural equation model had a good fit to the data (AGFI = .92, RMSEA = .047). The results showed that social support system function as a mediator to the extent that it accounts for the relation between acculturation and family conflict (β = -0.31, t = -3.86, $p < .05$), but family systems did not function as a mediator in the model (β = 0.00, t = -0.04, $p > .05$). The Multiple Causes and Multiple Indicators (MIMIC) model

showed that SES was a good predictor on acculturation ($\underline{\beta} = 0.15$, $\underline{t} = 2.08$, $\underline{p} < .05$), but religion was not a good predictor on all latent variables in the model (see Figure 1).

Implications for Social Work Practice

This study suggests more effective ways in working with the growing Korean American population. First, the definition of what constitutes success with social programs for immigrant families must be broadened to understand fully four critical variables—acculturation, family systems, social support systems, and family conflict while also considering three demographic variables: gender, religion, and SES. In particular, social workers must concentrate on assessing the social support systems of immigrant families. By understanding the importance of the social support systems that buffer family conflicts, social workers could work proactively to expand supportive family social support systems. This process should begin with respecting immigrant families' unique cultural heritage. A review of the literature on family intervention reveals how culture influences, defines and shapes the family structure, family practices, family responsibilities, family roles, and family conflicts. This process also requires social workers to intervene at multiple systemic levels—individual, family, extended family, church, and community.

Second, while the acculturation process is central to the lives of immigrants, it has been studied almost exclusively by its direct effect on family conflict. However, the results of this study indicated that acculturation on family conflict through social support systems was the most significant path. This implies that social support system may be said to function as a mediator to the extent that it accounts partially for the relationship between acculturation and family conflict. This finding supports one of the assumptions of the MULTI-CMS approach: That effective intervention requires the practitioner to intervene at a variety of systemic levels such as the individual, family, extended family, group, organization, and community (Goupaul-McNicol, 1997). It may be that social support system has a buffering effect on culturally-based family conflict in immigrant families.

Third, contrary to what the literature has indicated, the findings of this study suggest that the social support system was a better predictor of immigrant family conflict than acculturation. The extant literature on Asian families has focused too much on the difference in acculturation between parents and children without sufficient examination of whether this acculturation is reflected variously with different family social support systems. Parents and children can establish better relationships when they are strong support system around them.

Fourth, in order to work effectively with ethnic minorities like Korean Americans, social workers need to pay attention to and attempt to change some social policies that negatively affect an immigrant's social life. For example, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 contains several provisions targeting both legal and illegal immigrants for benefit terminations. Most of immigrants are ineligible

for any federal means-tested programs (including Medicaid) until they become citizens. The findings of this study suggest that socioeconomic status was statistically significantly associated with acculturation. Most immigrants have to deal with basic life issues such as financial security, housing, employment, health, and transportation. These social environmental hardships often complicate their migration stress and cultural adaptation. Although immigrants pay taxes to both state and federal governments, they are not eligible for any kind of social welfare. It is one of the responsibilities of social workers to try to change social policies that have a negative impact on immigrant with low SES and led to family functions and conflicts.

Finally, the findings of this study indicate that family systems were not a good predictor of and had no buffering effect on family conflict. Lung (1999) asserted that the higher-scoring collectivists would be less affected by family conflict. However, the results of this study did not support Lung's findings. This contradiction in findings may be related to the limitations of the scale that was used. It may not be effective to measure collectivism and individualism by using only one scale. Further, there are few scales to measure family systems that are based on strong theoretical considerations. Therefore, it is imperative to work to develop theoretically and psychometrically sound scales, which can be applicable to both theoretical and practical models.
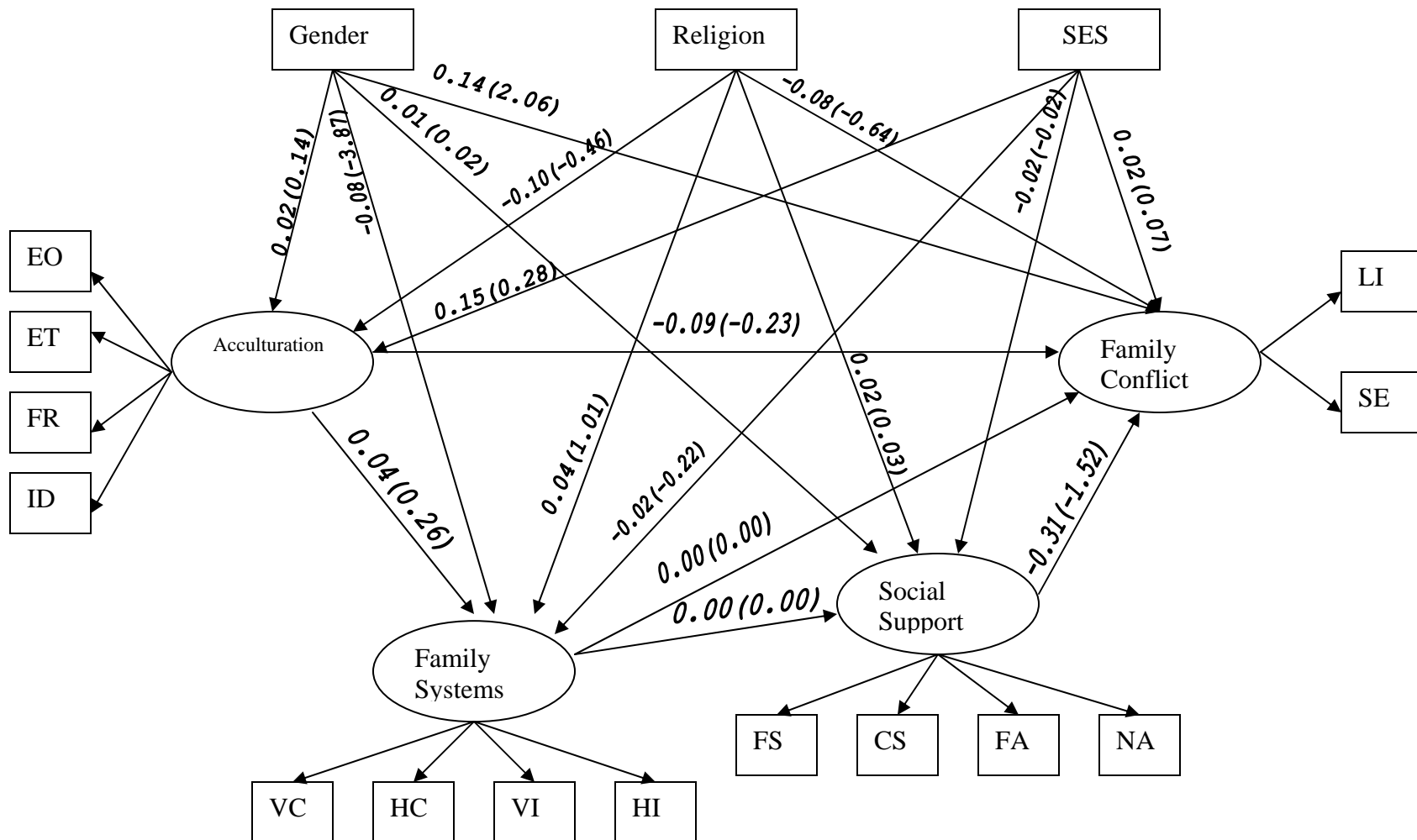
Gender

Religion

SES

0.14(2.06)

0.01(0.02)

-0.08(-0.64)

-0.10(-0.46)

-0.02(-0.02)

0.02(0.07)

0.02(0.14)

-0.08(-3.87)

EO

ET

FR

ID

Acculturation

LI

SE

Family
Conflict

0.15(0.28)

-0.09(-0.23)

0.02(0.03)

0.04(0.26)

0.04(1.01)

-0.02(-0.22)

0.00(0.00)

0.00(0.00)

-0.31(-1.52)

Family
Systems

Social
Support

VC

HC

VI

HI

FS

CS

FA

NA

Figure 1. Structural Equation Model of Immigrant Family Conflict (Unstandardized path coefficients are in parentheses).

References

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Lung, A. U. (1999). <u>Parent-Adolescent conflict and resolution in Chinese American and Caucasian families</u>. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.